Nodding Off
You May Need More Than a Nap
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Humans spend about one-third of their lives doing it, yet sleep remains misunderstood and underappreciated for its role in keeping us healthy and productive.

While some may view sleep as unproductive downtime, researchers say that sleep is actually linked to muscle repair, memory consolidation and hormone regulation linked to growth and appetite. Sleep contributes to a healthy immune system and enables us to concentrate, make appropriate decisions and actively engage in school and work activities.

Research shows that lack of sleep can hamper our ability to be productive during waking hours, affecting mood, accuracy, and performance of mental and physical tasks. Getting inadequate sleep can lead to serious health problems and jeopardize the safety of the people around you. Car accidents and workplace injuries are often caused by people who are not alert, or - in some cases - who are actually falling asleep without even being aware of doing so.

In addition to a greater risk of accidents, the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) reports that lack of sleep is linked to an increased likelihood of other potentially serious mental and physical issues, including:

- Obesity and higher body mass index
- Diabetes, heart problems and high blood pressure
- Psychiatric conditions, including depression and substance abuse
- Difficulty paying attention, remembering information and reacting appropriately

The NSF recommends that healthy adults sleep seven to nine hours out of each 24-hour period.

However, research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that some 40.6 million workers, or 30 percent of adults, report sleeping six or fewer hours on average in a 24-hour period. This is defined as "short sleep duration" - what we often call sleep deprivation. Studies show that managers and employees who work in manufacturing, mining, nursing, retail, and trucking industries are most likely to report short sleep duration.

Sleep problems can be the result of medical conditions, particularly those that cause discomfort, pain, and breathing difficulties. According to the CDC, some 50 to 70 million adults in the United States experience chronic sleep disorders, such as Sleep Apnea. With Sleep Apnea, you are sleeping, however, the sleep quality is bad, which in turn leads into all the short-sleep health and accident issues.

If you consistently experience morning sleepiness, daytime fatigue, or difficulty falling asleep, a thorough physical examination is needed to rule out medical problems. For many people, however, it's the long to-do list and late nights at the office that keep us from getting the sleep we need. Following these simple steps can help you and other family members learn to relax and welcome a rejuvenating night's sleep:

- Try to go to sleep and wake on a consistent schedule, even on weekends
- Create a relaxing bedtime routine for the hour before you expect to fall asleep
- Make your sleep environment dark, quiet, comfortable and cool
- Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillow
- Avoid working, watching television and similar activities in bed
- Finish eating or snacking two to three hours before you go to sleep
- Exercise regularly, but not within a few hours of settling down to sleep
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine before bedtime, and quit smoking altogether

Dr. Patrick Burns, DO, is board certified in Neurology and Sleep Medicine. He has practiced in the Flathead Valley since completing his residency at the George Washington University in 1988. In 1995, he started the Sleep Medicine Center, the first full service, accredited center in NHB Montana, and currently is the director of both the Whitefish and Kalispell locations. He has evaluated and treated more than 8,000 sleep disorder patients, which include diagnoses of sleep apnea, narcolepsy, insomnia, and restless leg syndrome.

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